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ABSTRACT

Research for Better Schools studied regional educational service agencies (RESA's) to learn how they contribute to school improvement activities. This report outlines the variety of training and assistance services that RESA's provide to local school districts. Identifying two important conditions in the delivery of these services--trust and the availability of useful services--the report outlines the factors promoting this trust and availability of services. Since RESA's work with both local districts and the state, divergent interests can create tension. In most states, careful designwork and attention to the divergent expectations of those interested in the work of RESA's can ensure a constructive relationship between the education agency and the RESA. An annotated bibliography and a list of references are provided with the report. (MD)

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The Study of Regional Educational Service Agencies: Summary of Findings

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Introduction

This report describes how the findings of Research for Better Schools' Study of Regional Educational Service Agencies illuminate policy options available to federal and state agencies supporting school improvement efforts. Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs) are those agencies located between the state and local levels of the educational system. They are organized in a variety of ways and provide a range of services to local school districts. One thing they all share, however, is the potential to provide training and technical assistance services. This potential can be used to disseminate new knowledge to schools or to support school improvement programs.

In fact, RESAs are well placed to provide training and technical assistance to school districts. Yin and Gwaltney (1981) suggest four reasons why RESAs are especially useful in this regard. First, their proximity to local districts makes them more accessible to educators than other kinds of agencies. Second, they provide economies of scale by serving several districts. Third, every state can have RESAs--in fact as many as 39 states do have RESAs (Stephens, 1979)--so they have broad applicability. Fourth, RESA staff have political and bureaucratic legitimacy as part of the state educational system. To these reasons, we would add two more. Because they serve practicing educators in schools, RESAs are attuned to the special needs of that population. Second, while their proximity to local districts sensitizes RESAs to district concerns, they have more time and resources than local educators to follow developments in a variety of fields. As a result, they can provide training that is both current and responsive to local need.

In 1979, Research for Better Schools--a federally funded educational laboratory serving Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware--initiated a study to learn how RESAs contribute to school improvement activities. This study serves three purposes. Research for Better Schools is using this study to strengthen its own efforts to assist with statewide dissemination and improvement efforts in its region. Second, the findings are useful to both the states who authorize RESAs and to RESAs themselves in their efforts to promote school improvement activities. Finally, the study contributes to the growing literature on how dissemination programs help put knowledge into use.

Policy and Design Issues

State policy makers and RESA directors and program staff face a number of issues when they offer training and assistance services. Among these are the following:

1. What services do local educators prefer from RESAs?

2. What factors promote service delivery?

3. Can the RESA serve both the SEA and the local district?

4. What conditions promote or reduce tensions between the RESA and the state?

These issues are addressed by the findings from Research for Better Schools' study of RESAs. Before presenting the findings, we briefly describe the study's setting and methods.

The RESAs in the Study

Three different kinds of RESAs in two states were included in this study. The 29 Pennsylvania Intermediate Units (IUs) were given a broad mission when they were formed in 1970. They provide special education, curriculum development, educational planning, and a variety of other services to member districts. While three-quarters of the 241 people in the typical IU directly provide special education services, every agency has from one to twelve people offering training and assistance in a variety of areas. These people coordinate regional inservice programs, provide workshops for districts, serve as consultants to curriculum development efforts, and coordinate contacts between the region and assorted state and federal agencies. The average IU region covers over 1,600 square miles and serves 19 districts.

The mission of the four New Jersey Educational Improvement Centers (EICs) was "on request... (to) provide support and assistance to local school districts and to members of teaching and administrative staff through the delivery of materials, techniques, and expertise necessary to improve school programs and services" (State of New Jersey, Chapter 58, Laws of 1978). They did not provide direct services to students. Staff size fluctuated considerably because the EICs relied heavily on special program funds won from state and federal agencies. In 1980, the average EIC had about 60 staff members, half of whom offered training and assistance to educators. The average EIC served 148 districts in a 1960 square mile area. In 1983, three of the four EICs closed.

While the EICs and Pennsylvania's IUs have their own governing boards, New Jersey's 21 County Offices are branches of the state Department of Education. In the late 1970s, their responsibility was regulatory. When New Jersey passed its Thorough and Efficient Education act (T&E), the County Offices had to ensure that various provisions of the law were followed, although they took on some assistance roles as well. The average County Office has seven professionals, six of whom provide assistance in the field. It serves 28 districts covering an area of 340 square miles.

Data Sources

Data for the study come from three sources:

1. Periodic tracking. Events regarding state-RESA interaction were tracked through visits to the state departments of education and interviews with state staff, RESA staff, and others familiar with these agencies. Documents describing RESAs and state policies were also collected.

2. RESA site visits. In the fall of 1980, site visits were made to 23 agencies: 11 IUs, 2 EICs, and 10 County Offices. The agencies were selected after consultation with state department staff to ensure variation in size, population density, geographic distribution, and reputation for training and assistance. In each agency from 3 to 12 field agents were interviewed and asked to complete a questionnaire. Complete data were obtained from 138 people. Agency administrators and external informants--usually a board member or a superintendent--were also interviewed (3).*

3. District site visits. In the spring of 1981, site visits were made to 68 school districts. The districts were chosen from among 198 that had been nominated by RESA staff as frequent users of the agency. Frequent users were chosen to obtain rich data on district-RESA interaction. In each district, an interview was conducted with a key informant who could provide an overview of the district's relations with the RESA. In addition, teachers and administrators in frequent contact with the RESA completed a questionnaire describing the relationship. A total of 347 administrators and 175 teachers completed the questionnaire (3).

Findings

The findings from the study are described in eight separate reports that are listed in the attached annotated bibliography. The main findings are summarized by policy issue.

WHAT SERVICES DO LOCAL EDUCATORS PREFER FROM RESAs?

Both managers of RESAs and SEA policy makers need to understand what services local educators prefer from RESAs. In the training and assistance

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*Specific reports that provide the data summarized here are cited by number in parentheses. The annotated bibliography in this report provides further information on each report.

area, one can define services in terms of both the content areas addressed and the delivery modes employed.

Content Areas

Local educators look for assistance in three broad areas:

- curriculum and instruction
- administration
- the outside world, especially state and federal laws and regulations.

Educators seek assistance about equally often in each area. Surprisingly, services in curriculum and instruction are not more valued than those related to administration or laws and regulations (6).

Curriculum and instruction includes support for any activity that affects what is taught and the way it is taught. The RESAs in the study provide three types of assistance for the teaching function: new program implementation, curriculum development and improvement, and staff development through workshops and inservice on a variety of topics.

Assistance with school administration covers a range of activities. Some are designed to improve overall organizational functioning (planning, budget and cost control, staffing and scheduling, and facilities maintenance); others improve the management skills of individual administrators (leadership skills, conflict management, and communication skills).

Knowledge about the outside world includes regulations and mandates, and the improvement of relations with community groups and other school districts. Of these, assistance with regulations and mandates is most valued. RESAs provide districts with a steady flow of information about current and pending regulations, and help districts comply with those regulations with a minimum of disruption (2, 6, 8).

Delivery Modes

RESAs provide services using four distinct modes: long-term project assistance, training workshops, brief interactions over the telephone or face to face, and visits to resource centers. Previous research suggests that long-term project assistance is the most effective way to ensure that improved practices are implemented in a school (Louis, Rosenblum, & Molitor, 1981). Although long-term projects are the most intense form of involvement, they are rare. It is also clear that educators use alternative delivery modes for different purposes. The table below summarizes information on the reasons for using each delivery mode as well as its intensity and frequency (2, 6).

Frequency, Intensity, and Reasons for Four Service Delivery Modes

Mode	Frequency	Intensity	Reasons For
Long-term Project	Low	High	Varied, including program development, program implementation and skills development
Workshops	Moderate	Moderate	Skills development on a more modest scale than long-term project
Brief Interaction	High, especially for administrators	Low	To get answers to specific questions. Sometimes to negotiate more intense activities
Resource Center Visits	Low	Low	To review or obtain materials

WHAT FACTORS PROMOTE SERVICE DELIVERY?

Two conditions are critical for effective service from the RESA: trust between local educators and RESA staff, and useful services, as perceived by locals. Six factors affect trust levels and the perceived usefulness of services:

- advisory committees that meet regularly and have representatives from all member districts
- stable program funding from year to year
- growth patterns
- RESA field agents who meet local expectations and who have good professional and interpersonal skills
- close interpersonal ties between locals and the RESA that provide quick and easy communication, working intimacy, and understanding of the other party
- leadership that is entrepreneurial and responsive to local need.

Committee structures foster regular, formal communication between local educators and RESA leadership and thereby promote more effective services that are attuned to district need (6). Local educators prefer advisory committees to more impersonal needs assessments. Advisory committees give local administrators the opportunity to express service needs, and give RESAs information that is necessary to be responsive and provide on-target assistance. The personal interaction builds trust in ways that filling out forms cannot. In addition, advisory committees that allow for the continuous representation of all member districts promote more responsive services than when membership rotates among a large number of districts.

Funding mechanisms create stability or instability in a RESA's budget. Heavy reliance on short-term grants and contracts reduces continuity in RESA services and controls the content of many programs. As a result, services offered are not always those that local educators think are most useful. Moreover, insufficient funding detracts from service delivery because the RESA cannot attract and retain high-quality personnel. In contrast, when districts can purchase RESA services by allocating a portion of their own funds to the RESA, services are seen as an investment and used heavily. Thus, governance structures that foster district-RESA communication and stable funding mechanisms promote useful services to local educators and build trust (6, 7).

Growth patterns can have contradictory effects on trust and the perceived usefulness of services. Especially during the 1970s, many RESAs were very entrepreneurial in seeking outside funding as a way of expanding their services. When this search was guided by a sensitivity to the concerns of local educators, it allowed RESAs to offer additional services that were appreciated by districts. At the same time, many educators were jealous of the growth of these entrepreneurial RESAs, especially when their district budgets were shrinking. Educators felt the resources going to RESAs should go directly to their districts. Some RESAs faced both appreciation and jealousy simultaneously (7).

Certain RESA staff characteristics are preferred by local educators and help build trust. They are field agent role congruence (i.e., the extent to which field agent behavior conforms to expectations), professional skills, and interpersonal skills (8).

Role congruence is high when RESA field agents behave in ways that school administrators prefer. When field agent behavior conforms closely to expectations, districts use a wide variety of RESA services (8).

These expectations include a certain level of professional and interpersonal expertise. Professional expertise consists of training and expert knowledge in substantive areas and "school savvy" or knowledge of the everyday life of schools along with the wherewithal to deal effectively in that milieu. Interpersonal expertise is the ability to get along with others. It includes communication skills and personality attributes. Local educators prefer field agents who are personable, open-minded, and

tactful. In addition, they prefer agents who are responsive to their district's individuality and unique need, accessible, and who provide timely, on-target, non-directive assistance (6).

These qualities characterize field agents with assistance orientations to their work. However, even field agents charged with monitoring compliance with state law and code prefer the assistance role, and tend to modify their work to be more helpful to districts thereby conforming more closely to expectations (4).

Networking structures that promote fast and easy communication (telephone contacts) and the development of working intimacy and mutual knowledge also promote valued services (6, 8). These qualities of the relationship promote easy access and on-target services, and characterize the most helpful RESAs.

In addition to governance and funding structures that are state-level decision areas, and field agent characteristics that are determined by RESA hiring, the role of RESA leadership in shaping service delivery is crucial (7). Leadership establishes the agency's overall approach to training and assistance--that is, the manner in which work is carried out. This approach includes initiative in offering services, the conception of local educators as clients, constraints on services offered, and initiative in searching for resources outside the region. The overall approach to service delivery is reflected in the staff hired, the support and guidance given to them, mechanisms for district-RESA communication, and the RESA's menu of services.

This study identified three possible approaches to RESA leadership: laissez-faire, marketing, or authoritarian (7). The laissez-faire approach is highly responsive but does little aggressive "selling" of services to districts and is not very entrepreneurial. The marketing approach is also responsive but tempered with a heavy dose of initiative in seeking external funds and in selling new programs or ideas to local educators. The authoritarian approach is much more restrictive: it responds to client requests when they conform to its preferred services, redefines requests so they conform, or ignores them. Of the three, the marketing approach is most likely to foster trust and provide useful services to districts. In some circumstances, however, a marketing approach can build resentment, especially if the RESA seems to have a stronger financial base than the districts with which it works.

CAN THE RESA SERVE BOTH THE SEA AND THE LOCAL DISTRICT?

The SEA and local districts have divergent interests that can make serving both difficult. Yet, the RESA's attachments to both agencies are so strong that it must find a way to assist both. Usually it can find a way to do so.

Although the SEA and local districts share the ultimate end of instructing children, their more specific interests are often quite different. These interests can create divergent expectations for the RESA. Local educators want the RESA to:

- help with program development
- help in coping with state and federal regulations and initiatives
- reduce costs through consortial arrangements among several member districts (6).

Responding to these requests is the fundamental reason for RESA's to exist. However, the state wants the RESA to perform certain activities:

- to help with the implementation of regulations and legislative mandates
- to help with state school improvement procedures (4,5).

Often the interests of districts and the SEA will be most divergent when they seem closest together. For instance, both the SEA and districts will ask RESAs for help in implementing a new regulation. However, the state will want to achieve the changes in districts that are most in the spirit of the legislation while district educators will seek ways to meet the state demands with a minimum of disruption.

RESA attachment to the local district includes professional, political, and financial ties. RESAs are fundamentally educational organizations and achieve their basic purposes through helping districts with educational processes (7). Local districts may become advocates of RESAs in the legislature through their state representatives (5). Moreover, districts purchase services from RESAs either through their state allocation or on a fee-for-service basis (7).

RESA attachment to the state is financial, legal, and political. The legislature authorizes RESAs and establishes their form. It also makes appropriations to RESAs. The SEA then administers those funds as well as regulations governing RESAs. In addition the SEA is a potential supporter of RESAs in the legislature (7).

In summary, RESAs must work with both local districts and the state, but they will find doing so difficult where the interests of the two kinds of agencies diverge.

WHAT CONDITIONS PROMOTE OR REDUCE TENSIONS BETWEEN RESAs AND THE STATE?

The divergent interests of the SEA and local districts create a potential for tension between RESAs and the SEA. The level of tension will depend on five conditions.

1. The political culture of the state. Every state has its own political culture (i.e., a pattern of shared orientations about what policies should be, what the rules for policy making are, and what the responsibilities of each level of government should be). In some states the political culture is conducive to the regulation of education while others give local districts more autonomy. Where the culture is regulatory, initiatives rarely start from the SEA. Instead, the legislature, the state board of education, and the courts make decisions that the SEA must implement. Generally, the more pressure the SEA is under to regulate districts, the more demands it will make of RESAs (5).

2. Historical precedent. At the time RESAs are founded, expectations are established about who the primary client will be and what RESA responsibilities to the state will be. Sometimes these expectations are shared by all parties, but there may be disagreements from the beginning. Where there is a shared expectation from the beginning that RESAs' first responsibility is to school districts, tensions are minimized (5).

3. Multiple RESA systems. Some states have more than one kind of RESA. Tensions will increase if the missions of two or more kinds of RESAs overlap. The SEA can pit one group against the other. Tensions will increase still more during periods of declining resources if the SEA has to choose between agencies (5).

4. Match between mandates and funding sources. Typically, the state legislature authorizes RESAs and establishes their formal structure and mission. However, funding comes from a variety of sources including the state, the federal government, and school districts. When RESAs are expected to meet the needs of one agency--e.g., the SEA--but receive the bulk of their funding from other sources, tensions are likely to arise unless the interests of all parties are extremely similar (7).

5. Enforcement mandates. RESAs that believe their primary mission is to serve local districts will resist efforts to make them into regulatory agencies or even to be associated with some regulatory efforts by providing ancillary assistance (5, 7). When a RESA's mission is defined as regulatory, field staff will still seek ways to redefine their role to emphasize providing assistance. They do so because they are drawn from the regions and professional groups they are expected to regulate and because they lack the power to regulate effectively. While enforcement specialists seek to define themselves as helpers and provide some kinds of assistance, they typically lack the time and resources to provide training. Tensions will be greatest in systems that expect field staff to serve both assistance and enforcement roles (1, 4).

Most of these conditions can be controlled by action of the legislature or the SEA. However, one--the state's political culture--cannot. There may

be some states where there are too many parties contending over educational policy for RESAs to operate effectively. Still, in most states, careful design work and attention to the divergent expectations of various parties interested in the work of RESAs can ensure a constructive SEA-RESA relationship.

Conclusion

Research for Better Schools' study highlights the variety of training and assistance services that RESAs can provide to local districts. It also identifies two key conditions for the delivery of those services: trust between RESAs and their clients and the availability of services perceived to be useful by local educators. The factors that promote trust and the availability of services include organizational arrangements that can be established by both the state and the RESAs, characteristics of the training staff, policies that can be adopted by RESAs, and qualities of RESA leadership.

This study also points out the potential tensions between local educators' and state expectations for RESAs and suggests that these can create tensions between RESAs and the state. Whether these tensions will appear, and how serious they will be, depends on a variety of conditions. For the most part, RESAs and the SEA--working with the state legislature--can create a low tension setting that promotes the effective delivery of RESA services to school districts.

Ultimately, we believe that the quality of the assistance provided by the RESA to local districts is the most important consideration. The RESA cannot effectively serve the state without first meeting the needs of local districts who have direct responsibility for providing instruction to students. Without strong ties to local educators, RESAs lack the trust relationship that allows them to provide the assistance the state often wants.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF REPORTS
FROM RESEARCH FOR BETTER SCHOOLS'
STUDY OF REGIONAL EDUCATION SERVICE AGENCIES

All reports are available from Research for Better Schools, Inc., Publications Office, 444 North Third Street, Philadelphia, PA. 19123.

1. Firestone, William A., and Bruce L. Wilson. Political and technical linkage. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., June 1982. 29 pp. ($3.50).

   Based on interviews and questionnaires from 138 field agents in 23 RESAs, this report examines two types of linking functions: technical and political. Technical linkage connects local educators with knowledge (e.g. instructional or administrative practices). Political linkage deals with knowledge about regulations and mandates at the state and federal units. Three field agent roles (expert/trainer, liaison, and monitor) and their association to each type of linkage were examined. Implications for policy are discussed.

2. Firestone, William A., Bruce L. Wilson, and Gretchen B. Rossman. Shopping for assistance: A boundary spanning role for administrators. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., November 1982. 40pp. ($5.00).

   This report compares the assistance-seeking activity of teachers, principals, and central office staff; examines how often they turn to different sources of assistance; assesses their ability to identify the quality of assistance offered and identifies factors that contribute to knowledge seeking in general and external knowledge-seeking in particular. Research and policy implications are discussed.

3. Firestone, William A., Bruce L. Wilson, and Gretchen B. Rossman. Annual report on study of Regional Educational Service Agencies. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., November 1982, 74 pp. ($7.50).

   This annual report summarizes research and dissemination activities of the RESA study through November, 1982. Appendix A contains detailed descriptions of sampling and data collection procedures. Appendix B contains sample survey instruments and interview guides.

4. Firestone, William A., and Bruce L. Wilson. Assistance and enforcement: Strategies for knowledge and program reform. Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization 1983, 4(3), 429-452. (Available from RBS for $4.00.)

   This report examines assistance and enforcement strategies used by three types of RESAs that are designed to promote knowledge use in schools. Based on interviews and questionnaires from 138 field agents in 23 agencies, the findings indicate that the two strategies are hard to combine but that field agents charged with enforcement want to work more in the assistance mode. Implications for policy and research are discussed.

5. Firestone, William A. The politics of technical assistance: Regional educational service agencies in their state context. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., April 1983. 31 pp. ($3.50).

   This report explores the web of relationships among state education agencies, legislatures, boards, and regional educational service agencies using case studies of two RESA-state systems. The development and form of technical assistance agencies are the result of the state's political culture, historical relationships, the agency's service mix, and the agency's direct relationship to the state legisla-

6. Firestone, William A., Gretchen B. Rossman, and Bruce L. Wilson. Only a phone call away. Local educators' views of regional educational services agencies. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., June 1983. 69 pp. ($7.50).

   This report describes local educators' perceptions of RESA services. Based on interviews with 72 central office staff in 68 school districts, the report identifies areas of prepared services, characteristics of the RESA district relationship and of RESA field agents that promote useful services, and governance and funding mechanisms that foster stability and communication. Policy implications are identified and discussed.

7. Firestone, William A., and Gretchen B. Rossman. You can lead a horse to water: Limits to state control over technical assistance agencies in education. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., June 1983. 36 pp. ($4.00).

   Based on case studies of four RESAs, this paper maps areas of central and local discretion in the provision of training and technical assistance. Two areas of control are identified: formal arrangements and approach to training and technical assistance. The state can establish the RESA's formal arrangements, but provides only limited constraints on the approach. Policy implications are discussed.

8. Wilson, Bruce L., and William A. Firestone. Educators and external assistance: Factors influencing breadth of knowledge sharing. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., 1983. 35 pp. ($4.00).

This report examines educators' search for new knowledge. This activity, often involving external agencies, can lead to improvements and helps cope with external pressures for reform. Using survey data from 345 school administrators, measures of breadth of knowledge sharing and factors contributing to it are assessed. Key explanatory variables include the networking behavior of educators, their organizational position, and the behavior of the assistance agency. Implications for policy and research are discussed.

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